



Artist as Activist: The Ohio State University Libraries and the Columbus Museum of Art Project to Promote Collections, Outreach, and Community Learning

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Abstract

In the winter of 2007, the OSU Libraries partnered with the Columbus Museum of Art to develop a program for exhibiting works from and disseminating information about collections that involve activism on the part of artists. The Museum has recently acquired objects from the Philip J. and Suzanne Schiller Collection of American Social Commentary Art, and has already begun building programs around the collection. The OSU Libraries have strong special collections holdings in theatre and cartooning and comics and list as part of their mission engagement with the community and the promotion of lifelong learning. The partnership is seen as a way to bring the two institutions together toward work for a common goal, taking advantage of our collections and team expertise.

On the libraries' end, the partnership has involved members from seven different departments: the Theatre Research Institute, the Cartoon Research Library, University Archives, Rare Books and Manuscripts, the Fine Arts Library, the Technical Services Department, and, interestingly, the Veterinary Medicine Library, whose librarian was asked to act as the proposal developer and to work with the Museum to develop the planning stages of the program and to write a grant proposal for a Museum/Library Partnership grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services. On the Museum's side, the curator of American art, the registrar's office, education, and development were all involved to present possibilities for collaborative work.

What has resulted is a vision for a dynamic cross-collections program that will involve an exhibition, a symposium, an interactive web site, and educational activities. Under the umbrella theme of Artist as Activist, we identified three topics that are pertinent to our city and region: the welfare of children, civil rights, and artists' responses to war. The programs will reach the entire city through an exhibition in recovered downtown space, through school programs and lesson planning, and will make a commitment to intergenerational interaction with activities for

senior citizens and elements online and in the exhibitions that will allow for sharing and response from our visitors.

This project has successfully brought to the table libraries, university departments, the Columbus Museum, and other community partners to work for a common goal. I will be speaking about our ideas for programming and outreach and discussing ways that art libraries can be active members of cultural networks and can contribute to the active intellectual life of our communities.

The Ohio State University hired a new president in 2008 and with him came a redefinition of what outreach means to the university. No longer is outreach considered a university-centered proposition. Rather, employees at all levels of the institution are expected to promote OSU and its programs to people *outside* of the school. For librarians in particular, this revision was a new way of thinking about engagement and who our patrons are. So often our outreach is student- and faculty-centered, but now we were being told it was not enough and that the entire world needed to be informed of our services and collections. This is an enormous challenge, but it also provides us with opportunities to try new ideas and programs that before this time might not have been supported by the administration. And fortunately, I was already a member of a committee that was developing a plan which had goals that reached well beyond the campus.

In the winter of 2007, several months before I started working as the fine arts librarian, Ohio State and the Columbus Museum of Art began meeting to discuss methods of partnership between the libraries and the museum. Ohio State is a huge institution – at last count, we had approximately 50,000 students – and the library system reflects its population. In addition to the main library, we have 27 subject-specific and branch libraries and many special collections that are located throughout the campus. One of the unique qualities about the library and museum project was that it brought together on a focused project librarians from seven different departments on campus: the Fine Arts Library, the Theatre Research Institute, the Cartoon Research Library, University Archives, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Technical Services, and, interestingly, the Veterinary Medicine Library, whose librarian was asked to serve as a neutral member of

the committee and as the project coordinator for the initial stages of the partnership. Although the Veterinary Medicine Library and its librarian have no affiliation with art, her focus on strategic planning and the “big picture,” rather than on what work and artists could be included in the project, helped to keep the work on target and to move our agenda forward in a timely fashion, enabling the group to apply for a \$500,000 grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

Representatives from the Columbus Museum included its curator for American art and members of its registrar, development, and education departments. Although the Museum has borrowed from the OSU libraries’ collections in the past and has used them for reference help, this was the first time that an official partnership had been formed between the libraries and the Museum.

What is the project? In 2005, the Columbus Museum purchased objects from the Philip J. and Suzanne Schiller Collection of American Social Commentary Art. This collection is particularly strong in 20th-century art in which the artist takes an activist role to produce work that focuses on issues such as civil rights, gender equality, war protest, and economic disenfranchisement. Because of this purchase, the Museum’s collection has become one of the premier compilations of art of this type in the United States. Some of the works have already been displayed, and the museum has launched a web site featuring images from the collection and lesson plans for kindergarten through 12th-grade teachers (<http://artandsocialissues.cmaohio.org/>). However, the education and curatorial departments were interested in an audience that expanded beyond those people who came to the museum, was interested in interactive displays and sites that would encourage audience participation, and wanted a partner with whom they could develop an entire exhibition devoted to art that works with social issues. Thus, our team was founded.

The first meetings were used to work through ideas and to discover what of our collections would work well together for such a project. What has resulted is a vision for a dynamic cross-collections program that will involve an exhibition, a symposium, an

interactive web site, and educational activities. Under the umbrella theme called “Artist as Activist,” we identified three topics that are pertinent to our city and region to which the Museum and the libraries could contribute materials, expertise, and ideas toward programming: the welfare of children, civil rights, and artists’ responses to war. These three areas hit close to home in Ohio: we are living in one of the poorest states in the United States; we have large African-American and immigrant communities, especially in our cities; and Ohio is one of the states hardest hit by casualties from the United States’ military activities. As we envision them, the programs will reach the entire region through an exhibition in recovered downtown space owned by the university, through school programs and lesson planning, and will make a commitment to intergenerational interaction with activities for senior citizens and elements online and in the exhibitions that will allow for sharing and response from our visitors. The notion that the programs would be geared toward adult learners as well as school-age children was of particular importance to the libraries, as our primary constituents are adults and part of our mission statement is a commitment to lifelong learning.

The libraries will play multiple roles in the “Artist as Activist” project. First, we will contribute objects for the exhibition. The Cartoon Research Library, because of its vast editorial cartoon holdings, is an ideal collection to contribute material to such an exhibition. Throughout the history of comics, cartoonists have used their medium to promote political views, serve as propaganda for decisions made by the administration, and to raise consciousness among their readers. The Theatre Research Library, too, owns costumes, set designs, and posters from original productions, as well as first editions of plays, many of which address issues that will be covered in the gallery show. Material created for plays such as those by Langston Hughes and Arthur Miller would be ideal for this exhibit. Unlike in other exhibitions, the library collections will not act to supplement the Museum’s objects, but will be of primary interest in their own right, serving to indicate an entire material culture that surrounded the exploration of these topics by fine and graphic artists, writers, and performers.

A second role for the libraries will be that of “story-keepers.” OSU’s libraries have become very involved in digital storytelling and have conducted workshops and days devoted to the encouragement of shared narratives by patrons, university employees, and the community. As part of this program, the libraries would sponsor blogs to allow visitors to the exhibit to share their own experience related to the Art and Social Activism collection and would offer storytelling stations at the exhibit itself to share on-the-spot experiences. Part of our business as librarians would then be to archive these stories to develop the oral history of our region and to protect it for future researchers.

Finally, the libraries would work as the university liaison for the program, spurring other departments to become involved, as well. For example, OSU has recently begun exploring the benefits of “service learning” for students and faculty, in which part of a class’ curriculum is devoted to serving the region in some way that sponsors an interest in service among the students, offers real-world experience for undergraduates, and benefits the community by identifying a need related to the goals for the class. For the “Artist as Activist” project, the libraries have enlisted a graphic design professor and one of his classes to work with us in order to design a web presence for the online portions of the program and to create exhibition-related paraphernalia, such as brochures and art trading cards. This means that our promotional materials will be designed without cost to the program or the partners and that they will be attractive and accessible for all of our audience.

Of course, much of the actualization of these ideas will rely on our group being awarded grant money. However, we have agreed that it is important both for the grant proposal and for our audience that we dedicate ourselves and our collections to at least some elements of the proposal even if grant funding is not forthcoming. I am confident that an exhibition and its online accompaniments will occur regardless of funding, both because of the interest in the topics generated by the partnership and also because an exhibition in OSU-owned space will make possible continued Museum programming and presence in the community during the renovation and expansion it is currently planning.

Already I have seen the benefit to the libraries of such a collaboration between the libraries and the Museum. Because I am a relatively new employee, this project served as an excellent way for me to familiarize myself with a large institution and its various departments. Before serving on this committee, I had no idea of the depth and breadth of the OSU libraries' collections. It also served to introduce me to Museum employees, their goals, and their research needs. The Museum has only a very small library with no librarian on-site. In my discussions with the curators since our first meeting, they have made me aware of the importance of the OSU Fine Arts Library to their writing and to the ways they think about and understand art. Museum employees are members of my patrons about whom I had not been told when I interviewed for my position, but they are a vital part of my off-campus outreach. This will only increase as the "Artist as Activist" program gets underway: I will be the project manager for the three-year plan, which will consume about 25% of my time. As for the libraries at large, the partnership with the Museum has helped us to understand other special collections in the city and has been important for establishing relationships on projects beyond developing the "Artist as Activist." The libraries are going to be part of a large exhibition at the Museum this fall called "Objects of Wonder from The Ohio State University," in which we get to showcase treasures that have been residing in our special collections. And the Fine Arts Library, the Cartoon Research Library, the Theatre Research Library, and the Historic Costume Collection have also been collaborating on a graduate class offered to history of art students that will focus on collecting, exhibitions, and the theories behind amassing materials that will be a complement to an undergraduate class that the American Art curator at the museum is already teaching on museum studies. All of these projects allow the libraries to put themselves forward as producers of programs and cultural arbiters, and not as mere repositories. The "Artist as Activist" project has given us valuable roles to play in the community, has prompted a strong working relationship with the Columbus Museum of Art, and has encouraged us to be active, as well.